Embracing Digital Disruption In Translator Training: Technology Immersion in Simulated Translation Bureaus

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Abstract

The aim of the present article is to show how the holistic approach of a "simulated translation bureau" (STB), bringing together many technological skills that would otherwise be taught separately in isolated course units, succeeds in familiarising translation students with the new ways of working and with new technologies.

Keywords: Translator training, technological skills, translation simulation, skills lab.

Resum

L'objectiu d'aquest article és demostrar que l'enfocament holístic d'un "despatx de traducció simulat", que treballa conjuntament diverses competències tecnològiques que en un altre context s'haurien d'ensenyar per separat en unitats aïllades, permet que l'alumnat de traducció es familiaritzi amb les noves maneres de treballar i amb noves tecnologies.

Paraules clau: Formació en traducció; competències tecnològiques; simulació de traduccions; laboratori d'habilitats.

Resumen

El objetivo del presente artículo es demostrar que la aproximación holística de un "despacho de traducción simulado", que engloba el trabajo de varias competencias tecnológicas que en otro contexto tendrían que enseñarse por separado en unidades aisladas, permite que el alumnado de traducción se familiarice con las nuevas formas de trabajar y con nuevas tecnologías.

Palabras clave: Formación en traducción; competencias tecnológicas; simulación de traducción; laboratorio de habilidades.

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1. Introduction

Digital technologies have considerably changed current translation workflows and practices and, consequently, have caused disruption in professional translation. The International Federation of Translators (FIT) chose "disruption" as one of its conference themes in 2017 (http://www.fit2017.org) and the theme was also echoed in the title of the 2017 Portsmouth Translation Conference (http://www.port.ac.uk/translation/events/conference); both were inspired by the broader idea of "disruptive technological change" as first introduced in Christensen (2015). That the upheaval in the translation market is mainly caused by digital innovations is aptly illustrated in Cronin (2013). Technologies now support translators in every step of a translation project workflow – starting from a client's request until the final delivery of the translation – and have therefore become a necessity rather than an option in professional translation settings (Biau-Gil and Pym, 2006).

The changing practices in the translation profession also affect translation curricula at universities and colleges. Translator training obviously continues to include linguistic and intercultural skills as well as other skills in key areas. But since there has been an increased emphasis on employability, thanks to initiatives like the European Commission's European Master's in Translation label (see section 2), translator trainers have also stepped up their efforts to familiarise trainees with the practical realities of the translation market (Thelen, 2016; Kiraly et al., 2016). As a result, the digital disruption in the translation market has had a disruptive effect on translation training as well, as it has meant embracing and training new skills that can only partly be taught in the context of traditional lectures and classes.

The aim of the present article is to present a pedagogical method based on the concept of the "simulated translation bureau" (STB), which aims to familiarise students with the new ways of working and with new technologies. In simulated translation bureaus, teams of students co-operate to undertake translation projects from beginning to end (INSTB, 2017; Kerremans and Van Egdom, 2018). In such an exercise, also called a "skills lab", students acquire hands-on knowledge and skills through immersion. Prominent among those skills are those related to technology: the holistic approach of the simulated translation bureau brings together many technological skills that would otherwise be taught separately (and we would claim less successfully) in isolated courses.

The article explains the rationale behind this working practice and illustrates how the new ways of working have inspired a number of universities to exchange good practice and to set up co-operation projects within a dedicated partnership called International Network of Simulated Translation Bureaus (INSTB, www.instb.eu).

2. The issue of employability

To answer to the demands of the translation industry, teaching translators today requires more than simply having the student "just translate" (although "translating" is in itself already a complex activity involving many different competences). In higher

education more generally, there is growing emphasis on addressing the employability and workplace-related skills of students (for the notion of employability see Yorke, 2006; for the specific case of translator training see Byrne, 2014: 27). In the area of translator training, the aspect of helping the students integrate into the labour market has received increasing attention particularly after the introduction of the European Master's in Translation programme. The "Wheel of Competence" (EMT Expert Group, 2009) introduced by the programme at its formation in 2009 outlined six areas of interdependent competences (language, thematic, intercultural, information mining, technological and translation service provision). The revised version, published in 2017, further emphasises strengthening the employability of future translators, and restructures the competences as five main areas (EMT Board, 2017):

1) language and culture
2) translation
3) technology
4) personal and interpersonal competences
5) service provision

Workplace-related skills are particularly emphasised in the service provision competence, which relates to issues such as negotiation, project management and other aspects of the professional context, and in the personal and interpersonal competences, which cover "generic skills" linked to improving employability, such as planning and time management, team work and continuing learning (EMT Board, 2017: 10).

Furthermore, the EMT competence framework emphasises the continuously growing impact of technological development and the disruption it causes in the translation profession. The technological competences forming one part of the overall framework cover skills related to the effective and adaptive use of translation technologies central to the process of translation, such as computer-aided translation (CAT) tools, machine translation, various office software, search engines etc., but also support technologies like workflow management software (EMT Board, 2017: 9). Due to the rapidly evolving technological landscape, predicting the precise tools needed by future translators may be difficult, and the ability to adapt and pick up new technologies is essential. This need to "learn to learn" technology is pointed out by Pym (2013) and also reflected in the EMT competence framework's inclusion of the ability to adapt to new technologies.

3. How to prepare for the labour market

To meet the industry demands, translator trainers employ various approaches aiming to promote the integration of translation programme graduates into the labour market. The pedagogical solutions that have become common currency in present-day translator training include:

1) making use of realistic/authentic material for in-class assignments
2) formulating a realistic/authentic brief for in-class assignments
3) introducing lectures/course units informing students on the realities of the translation market

4) introducing lectures/course units focusing on information mining, CAT tools, machine translation, corpora, etc.
5) promoting traineeships/internships

Although the approaches listed above offer ways to develop various pertinent skills and competences, personal and interpersonal competences and service provision competences may be more difficult to address in the context of translation courses. They can be learned during traineeships, but these may not always be readily available for all students.

Therefore, there is a need for a type of translation training that offers practice in providing translation services in a professional context, practice in applying suitable translation technologies in a realistic context, and practice in training competences related to team work, planning and time management. This is where the STB comes in as a potential solution.

4. The "simulated translation bureaus" solution

In STBs, teams of students set themselves up as a (fictitious) translation agency as part of their university/higher education training course and run their agency under mock-realistic circumstances, which vary from one course to another. They work on authentic tasks, though not necessarily "live". The bureaus typically run alongside other courses students take as part of their studies (INSTB, 2017).

The idea of a simulated translation bureau is certainly not new. At the Maastricht School of Translation and Interpreting (or "Vertaalacademie", Zuyd University), the idea already arose at the end of the 1980s to have students work in a fictitious translation agency as an alternative form of internship. In the late 1990s, the Tradutech project experimented with collaborative working methods in technical translation (Tradutech/OTCT 2015). The Tradutech/OTCT project (Optimising Translator Training through Collaborative Technical Translation), which ran from 2014 to 2016 and was funded as an Erasmus+ Strategic Partnership, built on the experience gained in the Tradutech project to further explore the possibilities of professionally-oriented practices within a classroom context.

These previous efforts show that the didactic concept of the STB has already been progressively implemented in translation training institutions throughout Europe. As a way of stimulating cooperation and exchanging best practices, a number of these institutions decided to join efforts in the International Network of Simulated Translation Bureaus (INSTB) in 2015.

In answer to recent calls for more holistic translator training (e.g. Krüger and Serrano Piqueras, 2015: 26), the didactic approach of simulated translation bureaus affords the students the opportunity to "learn by doing" and it allows them to acquire experience in all the required professional skills, as listed in the new EMT set of competences, all within a single exercise. In addition, the work carried out in the

bureaus can be used to increase the students' employability, as it can enrich the students' portfolio of experience in their CV.

Students will be reasonably familiar from their traditional courses with the EMT topics of Language and Culture, Translation and Personal and Interpersonal skills. However, the bureaus still play a crucial role in shedding new light on these already familiar topics. For example, students may experience that seemingly innocuous linguistic or intercultural mistakes might anger a client; also, students may feel the necessity to develop client management skills, thus bringing an element of disruption to their learning.

However, the EMT themes of Technology and Service Provision will likely prove the more disruptive elements in translator training, as the competences covered in them will be less familiar to students. In terms of Service Provision, for example, it is likely that most students will be faced with uncharted territory. They may have become proficient in translating to/from their languages, but they may not be equally proficient in the fine detail of the successful day-to-day running of a business, from administrative aspects (e.g. price calculation, invoicing) to collaborative work (e.g. liaising with terminologists or revisers, sharing translation memories).

Membership of INSTB does not impose a straightjacket on the individual STBs and on the contrary experimentation and innovation are encouraged within the network. This also means that some of the STBs will lay more emphasis on service provision aspects than others and some may stress particular technological aspects more than others do.

When it comes to Service Provision, for example, there is a gradual difference between the STBs where the teacher poses as a client, versus the cases where it is a university department or university service that commissions a translation job, versus those cases where external clients commission the work. The external commissioners are sometimes non-profit organisations that would otherwise not be able to pay for a commercial translation; but some members work with "real" clients that pay for the job, in which case the client has to be aware that the translators are students, not experienced translators.

With respect to technology there are, for example, STBs that insist on the students using a project management system (such as XTRF, LTC or MeisterTask), whereas others pay less attention to this aspect. Most STBs within INSTB make the students work with software that is also commonly used in the translation business (which inevitably includes SDL products), while others try to go for cloud solutions (like Memsource or Wordfast Anywhere); some extend the range by also including subtitling work or localisation, meaning they need relevant software for these tasks, too.

File formats used in the STBs similarly vary depending on the course and the commissions. While the majority of files translated are provided in some type of word processing format (MS Word or similar), in some translation projects the students need to handle formats such as pdf, xml, html or localisation files. Use of such file types generally also involves the use of support software.

STBs also differ with respect to how closely they work together with experts from the profession. Sometimes the expert is simply a part-time member of the teaching staff with professional experience; some student teams get assigned a permanent mentor from a translation agency; sometimes professional translators intervene with information sessions or they help out for the final assessment; some even act as revisers.

5. Technology immersion in simulated translation bureaus

Paradoxically, technology is both the most disruptive aspect of translator training and the key to success for students in their simulated translation bureaus. Students may have acquired conceptual and procedural knowledge of CAT tools in their courses but it will be in the bureaus where they will learn to combine all their knowledge and apply it to the real work of a professional translator. Mastery of the technology will allow students to carry out effective information mining for consistent and reliable terminological work, deal with different file formats, store translations in translation memories, work with and share packages, integrate MT effectively into their work with CAT tools and collaborate via the cloud, to name some of the most basic tasks that will involve a range of technological skills. In the simulated translation bureaus, students can explore how they can make technology work for them and complete their courses ready to join the workplace.

An important element in the didactic design of the STB is technology immersion. This concept implies that students learn how to deploy different types of technologies in their own translation projects: e.g. project management tools, terminology management systems as well as tools for automatic term extraction, CAT tools, machine translation engines, virtual meeting tools, etc. By being fully submerged within technology, students do not only learn about the functionalities of these technologies as well as the advantages that these technologies can bring to a translation project. They also experience how these technologies are interwoven in the translation workflow.

Although students work on authentic projects from real or 'fake' clients, the didactic design of the STB allows the STB teacher or instructor to determine how much (s)he wants to be in control of the student's learning process. In particular, the design of the STB course allows STB instructors to decide on the technological skills that students need to acquire or further develop in the context of the simulated translation bureau (STB). In some INSTB institutions, for instance, students are required to perform a specific set of predefined technology-oriented tasks in parallel with other project-related tasks, irrespective of the translation project in which the students are involved. These tasks need to be carried out successfully in order for students to attain certain pre-established learning outcomes that are defined for the STB course.

This feature of 'control' is one of the elements that distinguishes the STB from a translation internship. The latter offers students a possibility to become familiar with professional practices in a real translation bureau or other organisation in which they

further develop or refine the skills that were acquired through education. However, internships do not fully guarantee that students can further practise all of their technological skills, at least not in a way comparable to the simulated translation bureau. What students practise during an internship is obviously determined by the organisation providing the internship. For instance, in certain organisations or translation departments, students do not need to work with CAT tools, terminology management systems or other more advanced technological tools. This means that at the end of the internship, students may not have had the opportunity to further practise their technological skills in a professional context. This shortcoming offers a strong argument in favour of the STB as a means for translation training programmes to embrace digital disruption and to better prepare students (in combination with an internship) for a job in the translation industry.

6. Conclusion

In recent years, a number of courses, learning methods and strategies have been proposed to narrow the gap between translator training and practice. A sure-fire way to promote professionalism in translator training is to implement translation simulation exercises. Among the didactic concepts that are gathered under the umbrella of "translation simulation", the simulated translation bureau can be considered the most elaborate form of authentic experiential learning. This paper has provided a basic rationale for the implementation of simulated translation bureaus in translation curricula. Nowadays, the concept itself hardly seems to require any explanation or justification. Still, it has proved rewarding to observe simulated translation bureaus through the prism of disruption, as such an observation throws new light on professionalism and graduate employability in times of digital disruption.

Simulated translation bureaus do not only allow students to build on and bring together competences that have been cultivated throughout the translation curriculum, they also urge students to develop competences and skills that tend to play a less prominent part in their studies – and to do so in a highly functional manner. This functional enhancement relates to service provision competence, personal and interpersonal competence and to an important extent also to technology-based competence. In simulated translation bureaus, budding translation students accumulate first-hand experience of the pressures and quandaries professional translators face on a day-to-day basis. By embarking on a series of complex (near-)authentic projects, students are exposed to a slew of multi-facetted learning activities that urge them to leave their comfort zones and come up with solutions to unique and unanticipated problems, independently and/or with the support of their peers.

Another important reason why translation simulation bureaus are to be seen as the most propitious remedy to the (technological) trepidations in translation, is that the concept is not only holistic—in the truest sense of the word—but also an open concept. This is to say that, with the emergence of new professional realities, including new technologies, the didactic concept can be reinvented time and again.

The success of simulated translation bureaus and their contribution to better opportunities for graduates has not been proved 'in figures'. Quantitative research into this would need a reliable control group and the exclusion of many interfering factors. Nevertheless, some information may be gained by organising questionnaires asking students or recent graduates for feedback on the extra skills they have (or have not) acquired on the basis of their simulated translation bureau. The INSTB team currently have plans to set up this type of survey. Meanwhile, the reactions of the participants – students, mentors and clients alike – definitely hint that the methodology provides important added value in preparing students for the market.

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